

TRANSCRIPT

Uncorked: A wine shop owner's approach to energizing customer engagement

Podcast interview with Mitch Ancona, Owner of Ancona's Wines and Liquors; and Janelle Kozyra, member of Kimco Realty's blogging team

Janelle: Greetings everyone. I am Janelle Kozyra, a member of Kimco Realty's blogging team. Today we have on the line with us Mitch Ancona, who is the owner of Ancona's Wines and Liquors. They have two locations, one of which is in Kimco's Wilton River Park Shopping Center in Wilton, Conn. And so Mitch, it's great to have you with us today. Thanks for joining.

Mitch: Thanks for having me.

Janelle: We wanted to get together and get some updates on some of the new things you have going on at Ancona's Liquors. And in particular, some of the things that have intrigued us are some of the new marketing and social media efforts that you have going on, and you also recently broke a Guinness Book of World Record, which we are going to get into shortly.

Give us a little bit of background first on the liquor laws in Connecticut just so some of the other retailers and folks who are out there listening have an understanding of what the landscape is like for you in terms of operations in Connecticut.

Mitch: Sure thing. It's a very complicated answer that could take a long time, but I'll try to keep it pretty short. We're kind of controlled in what we can sell. We can sell wine, beer, spirits; things that are associated with those, like glassware; and we just were allowed to start selling cheese and crackers. But no other foodstuffs.

We're open Monday through Sunday. We just were allowed to be open on Sundays going back just a little over a year ago. We were limited to two licenses per person, per owner. That was expanded to three licenses about a year ago as well. So that's really it. There's a lot more going on, but I'll keep it relatively simple. I will say two markets in our state are allowed to sell beer. They don't sell wine whatsoever. So that's kind of a big factor as well.

Janelle: So not only, Mitch, are you the owner of Ancona's Wines and Liquors, but you also opened the first liquor store in Wilton. So can you tell us what you learned from that experience of bringing a new retail category to the area and what you looked for when you chose that location?

Mitch: You know, I'm the third generation in the store. Our original store is about a quarter mile from the border of the town of Wilton. Wilton, historically, was a dry town. So the concept of Wilton going wet was always on my father's mind, especially, more on a fearful side of things, because it would increase competition, obviously. I said, well, if someone is going there, it might as well be me.

So I took it upon myself to meet with the town lawyers, town attorneys, meet with the state, secretary of state, figure out exactly what had to be done as far as the petition, how it had to be scripted. We got that dialed in. It was a long, long process. So I guess what I learned from it is, it's very easy to get discouraged, but if you keep working with people and asking the right questions, you can eventually get there. And that's what happened. My take on it was never so much to say I want the town to go wet, my

take was always just to try to bring the question to the town, so that's what I focused on. And we were able to do that.

As far as picking the town. I didn't really pick the town. The town picked me. There was no retail wine business in there whatsoever because it wasn't allowed. And I knew being as closely located to the border as it was, whoever went in there was going to take a certain percentage from me. There's no way I could have competed, because it would have been 100% of convenience then.

So like I said, I sort of decided I'd rather take a little bit from one of my stores, and then gain from being further south, than have somebody else take. So we did it and it all came together pretty nicely. And now that store is doing just about the same volume as my first store is, so I'm pretty darn happy.

Janelle: So then let's get into some of the interesting things that you're doing to market Ancona's Wines and Liquors. And one of the things that we had a chance to read through before we got together today was your blog, which is called The Last Great Glass, and we're interested to hear from you just a little bit about your strategy with that blog and what you're hoping to achieve through it.

Mitch: Man, I think one of the most difficult hurdles nowadays is how to get your message out to your target audience. There's so many ways that people can receive information from you nowadays. It's really difficult to pinpoint where you want to put a lot of your resources. That blog, The Last Great Glass, came more out of the passion of to just share some of the cool wines that we found. It was never really designed to be too much marketing.

And then we just shared it and shared it, and it's on our website and we get it out there. We try to tie it to Facebook when we can. But it is written more on the perspective of, hey look, we've discovered this. If you're into this type of thing, you should check it out. And it's less, hey check this out, you should buy it because it's a special price or this and that. I don't know, it's a very complicated scenario with all the different avenues of social media.

I have, and I never thought I would have this if you'd asked me five years ago, I have a person full time, and that's all she does for me now, is my social media stuff. And she's great at it. Takes care of the blog. We all take turns writing for it. And Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and tying all those things together properly and making sure all the search engines find us.

Janelle: So of all those social platforms that you're using now, what do you think has been the one that's given you the most success?

Mitch: You know, Facebook is up there. I would say right now, Instagram has been doing pretty well for us as well. It's a little less—a little bit more difficult to track 100%, but there seems to be a move toward more people using Instagram, so that's kind of where we're heading right now. And we still do old-fashioned email as much as we can to get our message out to people.

Janelle: And Mitch, another big event for you recently was the record-setting sabrage event where you set out to beat the Guinness Book of World Records for the most bottles of champagne opened with a saber in under a minute. It's a pretty interesting task to take on. And we know that you beat the record. Can you tell us why you wanted to beat that record, and what the experience was like for you?

Mitch: Well, it's a number of bottles, champagne bottles, sabered in a minute. The previous record was 32. I did 34 very clean, 35 kind of on the buzzer. You know, I sort of am an obsessive compulsive type of person. I started sabering a couple years ago. One of my directors of wine, Cody Foster, came to me, and I asked him one day about it. And he said, yeah, I do it all the time. I'll teach you how to do it. He taught me how to do it and then it sort of snowballed.

I found myself Googling different videos on sabrage and sabering, and reading about the history. I really enjoyed the history of it, how it dates back to Napoleon and those times. And then I came across that there was a world record, and then I sort of on a lark, signed into Guinness and sent an application to break the record. It took a long time to get back, but they finally did.

When they did, I said, you know I could probably just sort of let it go and be like, ah, it would have been fun. But I have a 9- and 5-year-old daughter, two daughters, and try to lead by example. So I was trying to teach them the concept that the important thing in life is that you try something, just try. Try, even though it could be scary or you might not feel like you're going to succeed in what you're trying, but you don't succeed in anything unless you try.

So it was kind of this mixed concept of teaching my kids by example, and come on, who doesn't love champagne and swords, so that was the dual side for me. And it was a great way to throw a party, too, which we did. We have a bocce court down near our first store, too, so we put a big 70-by-30-foot tent and we served brunch on a Sunday morning and champagne and it was a good time. It was fun.

Janelle: Do you think you have seen any increase in foot traffic to either of your stores since holding the event, or do you anticipate seeing any increase?

Mitch: I don't think it's going to equal out to a whole heck of a lot of increased sales, increased foot traffic, but I think it's always good to get that sort of goodwill out there. And it's always good to get your name out there, and it's tied to a pretty positive event. So I think that has some sort of positive repercussions that might be a little bit more difficult to measure.

Every day, people want to talk about it with me, and congratulate me. So the word's definitely out there. I absolutely adore champagne and I wish more people drank champagne more regularly. It seems like in this country, there has to be a special occasion tied to it, and me, my theory is any day you wake up in the morning is a good day. So if you can, you might as well celebrate as much as you can, so there you go.

Janelle: Is there anything else percolating from a marketing perspective or from a community relations perspective?

Mitch: You know, our main focus is October, November, December, getting geared up for that staffing-wise, product-wise. And then we always do special events within those three months. We do wine dinners all the time. We do education in our stores once a week, so we'll start tailoring some of those educational classes towards holiday things.

The other thing that I'm big, big, big into as far as my staff is education. So there's about six or seven people on my staff doing the industry level of the Society of Wine Educators, and it just sort of builds enthusiasm. It's no fun going into a wine store and talking to someone that doesn't love wine, so we try to build that with our staff.

Janelle: Great, well, it sounds like, Mitch, you're going to finish the year strong and it looks like you've got solid years ahead of you as well.

Mitch: Thanks, I hope so. Knock on wood.

Janelle: Alright, thank you Mitch for joining us. It was a pleasure talking with you.

Mitch: No, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

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